



IN REPLY REFER TO:

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Fort Smith National Historic Site

P.O. Box 1406

Fort Smith, Arkansas 72902

May 1, 2000

Mr. Charles Portis
7417 Kingwood Road
Little Rock, Arkansas 72207

Dear Mr. Portis:

Thank you for your kind offer to answer a number of our questions concerning your novel *True Grit*. We are nearing completion of a major renovation of the historic site, including new exhibits and a partial restoration of the jails and courtroom. Several exhibits will feature the popular culture of the park story including a first edition of your novel as well as the poster from the film.

True Grit continues to be of interest to a great many of our visitors. Our staff attempt to answer their questions to the best of their ability but we feel your responses will allow us to answer with much more accuracy than we have in the past. Having your personal recollections to go by will also add something special for the visitors.

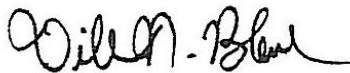
1. What was your inspiration for the story?
2. Did you have a specific audience in mind when you wrote the novel? Using a young girl as the storyteller and main character does not appear to be the normal way to write a typical "Western". Was it originally marketed as a western?
3. The number one question we get on *True Grit* is about Deputy Marshal Rooster Cogburn. Was Rooster based on a real person or a compilation of characters? For many years we have told visitors that there was a real life mean one-eyed deputy who may have been the inspiration. How did you come up with the name Rooster Cogburn?
4. Are any of the characters or events in the novel based on actual people or incidents? If so, could you describe your research process for this material? What drew you to particular people or events? Several of us are especially interested in Mattie falling into the pit and rattlesnake bite. There is a very similar real story that we tell visitors and we have been very curious if this was the basis for your setting
5. How do you feel about the screen adaptation of your novel? Obviously they took great liberties with the location, but were there any other aspects you liked or

disliked?

6. Were you involved in the writing of the screenplay or any other part of making the movie? Were you on location for any of the filming? Any observations you might share with us?
7. John Wayne won an academy award for his role, which must have been very special to him. Did you ever meet him and did he have any observations on his role you might share with us? Any other comments or stories concerning him or the other characters you might pass on to us?
8. Did you have any involvement with the movie sequel *Rooster Cogburn* or with what I understand was a pilot for a television show? Any comments or observations?

Thank you for your patience with our questions. I would like to invite you to the grand opening of the building and exhibits on June 24 at 11:00AM. If you cannot make it then please accept our invitation to visit at any time. We would be most happy to give you a VIP tour of our new facility. We can be reached at 501-783-3961 seven days a week. We do have a web site at www.nps.gov/fosm that you might find of interest.

Sincerely,



William N. Black
Superintendent

May 29, 2000
7417 Kingwood
Little Rock, Ark 72207

Dear Mr. Black

Thanks again for your interest. I apologize for the delay in responding but I've been out of the state for a couple of months. Here goes, on your questions. I'll take them in order and do my best, as memory serves. It was many years ago when I wrote that story.

1. I was reading some Western memoirs at the time, many of them reprints from the Frontier Series of the University of Oklahoma Press. I liked the form and the tone—a first-person narrative, simple, direct and innocent. So, I thought I would try my hand at a fictional version. I settled on a revenge plot, common enough in such accounts. The hard part was getting the voice of the narrator right, and sustaining it. An old lady, remember, is telling the story. She relates these rather squalid events in what she takes to be a proper, formal way. And she shows herself, unconsciously, perhaps, to be just as hard in her own way as these hard customers she disapproves of, and has to deal with. Again, as I recall, it was all largely a matter of getting the voice right.
2. No, I had no particular audience in mind. You write what interests you, without looking over your shoulder, and sometimes the thing appeals to others. Not always. The broad national success of it—of what is a very regional story—surprised me. It was on the best-seller list for several weeks. You ask about having "a young girl" as the story-teller. I remind you again that an old lady is ~~doing~~ doing the telling, about a childhood adventure. For some reason I just liked the idea of having a starchy old lady as a narrator. And, no, the book wasn't marketed as a Western by Simon & Schuster, though I really don't know much about that end of the business.
3. No, Rooster Cogburn wasn't based on a specific person. I've had letters from people of that name, claiming to see a likeness to some relative or other of the period, but to me he was just a representative figure of those hardy deputy marshals who worked for Judge Parker's court. I wanted Scots names for the leading characters, and so came up with Cogburn (corruption of Cockburn) and Ross. "Rooster" is a nickname given to belligerent little fellows in the South. Cogburn is a big man, but I wanted him to be called "Rooster," so I had it derive from his given name of Reuben.

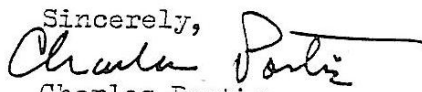
4. Yes, I did take the snake pit episode from the actual event. Some other things, too, I'm sure, from written accounts, but I don't recall any specific ones offhand. As for my "research" methods, they were alternately intense and slapdash. I tried to get transcripts of Judge Parker's trials, and was told by a court clerk that, if they existed at all, they were probably baled up and moldering away with other papers in a government warehouse in, I believe, Fort Worth, Texas. In short, unfindable. I did read newspaper accounts of the trials on microfilm from the Fort Smith Elevator and other papers. I read whatever books and pamphlets came my way, and I did walk the ground where the events in the story take place. On the whole, however, my "research" wasn't very professional. If I couldn't confirm something, or locate a particular fact I needed, I would just make something up. And something much better, too, I told myself, than the dreary fact would turn out to be. I wasn't writing a treatise, only a novel. Still, you like to get things right.
5. Yes, the screenplay stayed pretty close to the book. I noticed that the movie director, Henry Hathaway, used the book itself, with the pages much underlined, when he was setting up the scenes. I also noticed that some of the actors had trouble speaking the (intentionally) stiff dialogue. I didn't write the screenplay. It was sent to me and I made a few changes, not many. I did write the last scene, in the graveyard, which didn't appear in the book or the script.
6. Most of the movie was shot in the Uncompahgre National Forest, near Montrose, Colorado. I was there for a couple of days. They were doing the scene where Rooster rides into the outlaws, firing away, across an open field. Hal Wallis, the producer, had considered making the movie in Arkansas, and sent an advance man here. I drove this fellow (can't remember his name) around northwest Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. He took still photographs and made notes. Along the way I bought him a baloney and Miracle Whip sandwich at a country store. The sandwich didn't please him but he did like the town of Van Buren, saying the main street would do nicely for 1870s Fort Smith, once his crew had removed all the power line poles, buried the wires, altered some store fronts and covered all the pavement with dirt. I was impressed. Powers of eminent domain, unlimited funds. This outfit wasn't called Paramount for nothing.

Later, Hal Wallis called ~~me~~ to tell me that there were logistical problems with shooting the picture in Arkansas. I can't remember what they were, but Arkansas was out. I have the idea (someone had to have told me this) that Hathaway persuaded Wallis to make it in Colorado. It seems that Hathaway had, some years before, marked down that stand of yellow aspens in the mountains near Montrose, and was determined to make his next Western there, whatever the setting given in the script. When I mentioned to him (Hathaway) that True Grit wasn't really a Big Sky Western, he said, yes, he knew, but it didn't matter, because all Western movies were fairy tales, more or less, and a spectacular landscape was expected. It was part of the mix. I saw his point but ~~the fact that the landscape was not in Arkansas~~ didn't think it applied in this case.

Hathaway was a gruff old bird, quite hard on the actors. He and John Wayne had one blazing row while I was there. Strong, loud words. The whole thing is coming to an end right here, I thought. Ten minutes later they were back at work. Such flare-ups were normal, I was told, in this tense and edgy business. But everyone was cordial to me, even Hathaway, although I've heard that movie people don't much like having writers (useful insects, in our place) hanging about during the filming. Who can blame them? They know we're only going to make suggestions, when it's far too late for second thoughts. Wayne was a bigger man than I expected. We, the cynical public, are led by rumor to believe that movie stars will be dwarfish, disappointing little fellows in the flesh, but Wayne was no let-down. He was actually bigger than his image on the screen, both in stature and presence. One icy morning, very early, before sunrise, we were all having breakfast in a motel cafe, before making the long drive up into the mountains for the day's shooting. A tourist, a middle-aged woman, startled to see John Wayne sitting across the room, came over (against her husband's obvious wishes) to speak. Wayne rose to greet her. She went into a long, incoherent story about her son having been in the same college fraternity (Sigma Chi, I think) as Wayne. He stood there, not fidgeting and just hearing her out, but actively listening, and chatting with her in an easy way, as his fried eggs congealed on the plate. I took this to be no more than his nature. A gentleman at four o'clock on a cold morning is indeed a gentleman.

7. See above.
8. I don't remember having much to do with the Rooster Cogburn sequel. The script ~~was~~^{was} sent to me and I think I did tamper with it some. Not enough, it seems. And yes, there was a television pilot movie, with the actor, Warren Oates, playing Rooster, but I don't believe I was involved at all in that project.

This has tended to run on a bit, but I hope it's of some help. And let me thank you for the invitation to the grand opening on June 24. I won't be able to attend but I will certainly drop in some time to see all the new arrangements.

Sincerely,

 Charles Fortis